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ABSTRACT

Despite disagreement on other fundamental issues, most contemporary theories of emotion suggest that one consequence of emotional experience is some profound, if temporary, change in the way in which the self is experienced in the emotion-evoking situation. Both clinical and laboratory data have demonstrated the power of self-focused attention to determine the quality of experience. Self-focused attention, in turn, reflects the operation of a hypothesized cognitive structure (the self-schema) which directs the processing of information relevant to the self. The self-schema appears to play a powerful role in directing attention, retrieval, and other aspects of information processing. When the self-schema is activated, experience becomes intensified; when attention is directed away from the self, there is a corresponding attenuation in intensity of experience. If the operation of the self-schema is more closely examined, it should be possible to determine that in those situations in which self-focused attention occurs, experience has an emotional character. Emotional experience needs to be redefined in terms of self-awareness because the relationship between emotion as it is immediately experienced (felt emotion) and other emotional processes has not been spelled out adequately in either the theoretical or research literature. There is evidence implicating self-awareness as a crucial variable in determining felt emotion. There is insufficient evidence that any other construct can be as broadly or productively applied to a description of felt emotion. (JAC)

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THE CONCEPT OF SELF IN EMOTION THEORY

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30,1983.

The Concept of Self in Emotion Theory[1]

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Despite disagreement on other fundamental issues, most contemporary theories of emotion explicitly or implicitly suggest that one consequence of emotional experience is some profound, if temporary, change in the way in which Self is experienced in the emotion-evoking situation. In this paper, I will summarize what we presently know about self-awareness and the concept of Self and apply it to major contemporary theories of emotion. I will then suggest an alternate view of the role played by self-awareness in emotional experience. I will demonstrate that the evidence favoring a reinterpretation of the link between emotion and self-awareness suggests that change in self-awareness is not simply a result or correlate of emotion, but rather, that self-awareness is the essential quality of the experience of emotion.

Although today there are over twenty major psychological theories of human emotion (Strongman, 1978), the relationship between Self and emotion, when it is considered, is described in one of two ways. In the first, special qualities of self-awareness are treated as a product of specific kinds of emotional experience (e.g., Bull, 1951, 1968; Izard, 1977; Lazarus, Kanner, & Folkman, 1980). In this model, for example, positive emotion may produce positive self-regard, whereas negative emotions should have an opposite effect. A second view is that change in self-awareness is a symptom or component of emotional consciousness generally, and is, as such, one of several factors which defines experience (e.g., Solomon, 1976; Leventhal, 1974). Consistent with this approach is the description of specific emotions as composites of self-assessment, situational cues, power-status relations, and other discrete variables which interact to define them.

A quite different view of the relationship between self-awareness and emotional experience is provided when three other areas of research are considered. Consequences of self-focused attention have been studied by both practitioners and by social psychologists, and cognitive psychologists have begun to investigate the role of one's self-definition in information processing. Developments in these areas suggest the need to reexamine the relationship of self-awareness to emotional experience. The research results favor a view of that relationship which stresses the fundamental importance of self-awareness as the quality which makes experience "emotional."

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[1]Paper presented at the meetings of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, 1983. This is a working draft, please do not quote without permission. Comments are welcome. Mailing address: Department of Psychology, University of California, Davis, CA 95616.

The research of practitioners is the first area which provides evidence of the special experiental qualities of self-awareness. Clinical literature emphasizes the need to redirect self-perception or reduce self-awareness if one's efforts to manage or alter emotional experience are to be effective (e.g., Ziller, 1971; Andrews, 1977). For example, Spielberger and his colleagues (Spielberger, Anton, & Bedell, 1976) have found that the most effective technique for control of test anxiety is a redirection of attention toward the task and away from oneself. Altering one's focus of attention, not by directing it away from the problem, but by directing it away from oneself or changing its quality as it refers to oneself, clearly has an effect on the individual's emotional status. This effect would not be predicted by current emotion theories as summarized above. If particular qualities of self-awareness are products of emotion, as some emotion theories suggest, efforts to change or reduce self awareness should neither be necessary nor sufficient to produce change in emotion. It is not logically consistent to assign a causal role to the product. If, as other emotion theories suggest, self-evaluation is one of a set of components which define emotional experience, but with no special or greater capacity to color experience than any other component of emotion, efforts at change in self-evaluation should not be expected to be any more effective in producing emotional change than would be variation in any other component.

What alternate view of self-awareness in emotion would be consistent with the clinical findings? The effectiveness of altering self-directed attention can be explained if the relationship between self-perception and emotional experience is considered as other than the simple consequence or component of emotion experience. I suggest that if some quality or kind of self-awareness which is itself the fundamental quality of what we recognize in ourselves as "emotional" experience. In other words, felt emotion may be best understood as a kind of self-awareness, not as the consequence of appraisal of some emotion object, nor as epiphenomenal to specific patterns of neural excitation, nor as the aggregate of internal and external cognitive cues. Thus, change in self-awareness would be effective in altering emotional experience when it involves altering the individual's essential experience of self vis-a-vis the emotion object.

A second area of research suggests the efficacy of reevaluating the role of self-awareness in emotion and equating felt emotion with some fundamental quality of self-awareness. In recent years there has been a revival of interest among social psychologists in the contents and organization of concept of Self. They have paid particular attention to the tendency to attend to oneself and to focus on one's own thoughts, appearance, and activities. The tendency to become self-aware, whether because of an enduring personality trait or temporary situational factors, is referred to as self-focused attention. Both situational and dispositional self-focused attention have a pronounced effect on behavioral and self-report measures of emotion. In a series of studies Carver and Scheier and their colleagues (summarized in Carver & Scheier, 1981), have shown that if self-focused attention is induced by including a mirror in the experimental situation, significant effects on fear, anger, repulsion/attraction, and depression are obtained. In one study, for example, Carver and Scheier (1977) selected snake phobic and nonphobic subjects on the basis of questionnaire responses. Subjects were asked to approach and pick up a nonpoisonous snake contained in an aquarium. When self-focused

attention was induced by the presence of a mirror, phobic subjects reported more fear and withdrew from the task earlier. All nonphobic subjects completed the task, but those in the mirror condition reported significantly more fear than other nonphobics. Carver and Scheier's studies consistently point to a relationship between occurrence of self-focused attention and the experience of emotion. If emotional experience can be construed as fundamentally a state of self-focused attention, then there should be a relationship between measures of the tendency to become self-aware and frequency and/or intensity of emotion episodes. In our own lab we have, in fact, obtained a significant positive relationship between tendency to become self-aware as measured by the Private Self-Consciousness Scale (Buss, 1980) and self-reports of emotional expressiveness and frequency of emotion for both sexes (Shields & Lathom, 1983).

Work on the social psychology of Self as a construct has borrowed the concept of schema from a third area of research, cognitive psychology, to explain the apparent organizing role of self in information processing. The construct of a self-schema has special relevance to understanding emotional experience because it can be used to describe conditions under which self-relevant cognitions should have an affective quality and the factors which determine the evaluative dimension of self-related cognitions. Neisser (1976) defines schemas as dynamic, internal structures, specific to the percept, which direct attention, organize and interpret information, and direct behavior accordingly. The schema continually is modified via assimilation and accommodation as it operates.

The concept of a self-schema as a fundamental component of personality occasionally is incorporated into theories of personality (e.g., Epstein, 1973), but empirical investigations of the dimensions and operation of a self-schema have only begun to appear recently. Not only is there evidence for the existence of such a schema (Markus, 1977; Rogers, Rogers, & Kuiper, 1979), the schema appears to direct processing and recall of information directly relevant to the self (Kendzierski, 1980).

To summarize the empirical data, both clinical work and laboratory studies have demonstrated the power of self-focused attention to determine the quality of experience. Self-focused attention, in turn, reflects the operation of an hypothesized cognitive structure (the self-schema) which directs the processesing of information relevant to the Self. The self-schema appears to play a powerful role in directing atttention, retrieval, and other aspects of information processing. When the self-schema is activated experience becomes intensified; when attention is directed away from one's self there is a corresponding attenuation in intensity of experience. These results suggest that if the operation of the self-schema is more closely examined we should find that it is precisely those situations in which self-focused attention occurs that experience has an emotional character.

Up to this point I have focused on the evidence that suggests we should take a new look at self-awareness in emotional experience. To conclude my talk I would like briefly to turn my attention to two questions that I've so far left unanswered. First, why does emotional experience need to be redefined -- whether in terms of self-awareness or any other construct? Second, what are

the advantages of selecting self-awareness over other possible constucts/processes for this redefinition?

Why does emotional experience need to be redefined? The relationship between emotion as it is immediately experienced (felt emotion) and other emotion processes, including perception of bodily change, labeling of subjective state, and attempts at emotion dissimulation or management, has not been adequately spelled out in either the theoretical or the research literature. Moreover, if we wish to gain precision in understanding the interaction between emotional experience and other interpersonal processes, such as socialization, or dyadic interaction, we need better understanding of mechanisms that may mediate that interaction.

Why represent experience in terms of self-awareness rather than some other process? Self-awareness is a recognized component of emotion experience in most theories of emotion. There is much evidence, some of which I summarized above (social psychology of the Self; clinical management of emotion experience; self-schema thoery), which implicates self-awareness as a crucial variable in determining felt emotion. At this time I do not believe there is sufficient evidence that any other construct can be as broadly or as productively applied to a description of felt emotion. Furthermore, if one accepts the validity of traditional research strategies, there are methodological advantages in selecting a variable which has a long research history, that has been operationalized in a number of ways, and which has produced a literature that is a rich source for deriving testable hypotheses regarding the self-awareness/emotion relationship.

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